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THE INSIDERS

Luxury Condo Tastes Have Become International, Says Waldorf Astoria Miami Designer

The partner at San Francisco-based design firm BAMO has created the interiors for buildings from Bangkok to French Polynesia



Ms. Wilkinson with her recent project, the Waldorf Astoria in Miami.
COMPOSITE: COURTESY OF BAMO / WALDORF ASTORIA MIAMI



Anne Wilkinson, a principal at San Francisco-based design firm BAMO, faced the unique task of helping guide a nearly century-old brand, Waldorf Astoria, into the 21st century by designing the modern interiors at its forthcoming Miami project.

“It is shifting more modern, more contemporary with the newer, newer projects,” Ms. Wilkinson said of the iconic hotel brand. “And that is by design, that’s the direction they want to go. So we are helping them shift the needle.”

She’s well-suited for the task. For over 25 years Ms. Wilkinson has worked on major hospitality and luxury condominium projects around the world, including the riverfront Capella hotel in Bangkok and the Four Seasons Private Residences Chao Phraya, also in the Thai capital. Other projects have taken her to Bora

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Bora, in French Polynesia, Milan, Italy, and across the U.S., from Chicago to Southern California.

She spent some time speaking to Mansion Global about the process behind the Waldorf Astoria Miami interiors, her boldest design move and one very special 1916 bungalow.

MG: Tell me about the aesthetic at the Waldorf Astoria in Miami, and how did your approach change from the public spaces to the individual residences?

AW: It really drew inspiration from the building and the idea that this is the tallest residential tower south of Manhattan, we wanted to capture some of that height. You're up in the sky, you're going to have views that nobody else would have, you're up in the stratosphere if you will. So you're really seeing the sky, and a lot of Miami, so the design is very nature-oriented. Our nature references are very much about the sky, the atmosphere and the colors that you see.

One of the things I loved about the description of the building is it's nine stacked cubes in this beautiful, tall, slender sculpture that rotate and shift, and they each reflect a different portion of the sky. So our colors are those sky references, coral pink, a sort of softened, atmospheric version; crisp blue; shades of gray; even into lavender. The aesthetic is modern, but there are subtle references to the Waldorf Astoria and the legacy, which has a very strong Art Deco aesthetic.

The residential spaces are a bit quieter. They are a little more understated because you don't necessarily want to live in an optical environment. They do have some wild moments, every residence has this beautiful foyer with a custom stone floor.

MG: You've designed projects all over the world. Does the location influence your design process or final product?

AW: Yes and no. In our project in Bangkok, the larger units have two kitchens, one is the public-facing kitchen, fit with all the beautiful finishes and high-end appliances. Then there's the working kitchen, where essentially they do all of the high-fat frying or things that are stinky and messy. That's honestly where a lot of the cooking is done and it is a fraction of the size, maybe a quarter of the bigger kitchen. So that's one specific difference. But in terms of how the bedrooms are laid out or the bathrooms, I would say not in the projects that we've done

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because I think a lot of the people who are buying into a high-end condo, they are looking for more than international design aesthetic.

MG: Has the pandemic shifted what clients or home buyers are asking for? Has it been a part of your discussions at all?

AW: Outdoor space has become much more desirable and sought after. And to the extent that you can connect indoors and outdoors as much as possible, that's desirable. In Miami, we have these nice big sliders that really open the living dining area to the terrace. Same thing in Bangkok, we had accordion doors that fully fold back. That indoor-outdoor connection was already a trend but the pandemic pushed the desire for that.

MG: Tell me about some of the boldest design decisions you've ever made?

AW: Waldorf Astoria, they have a long tradition of having a signature clock in their properties. It started with the original property, a clock that was done for the Columbian Exposition [in Chicago in 1893], one of the big designs there, ended up in the hotel. It's an iconic piece. Every Waldorf Astoria has a signature clock that's unique to that particular property. That's the challenge of every designer: How do you come up with a new idea for a clock?

We came up with an idea of using a Foucault pendulum as our suggested clock. It was discovered by Léon Foucault in France and exhibited in the Panthéon in Paris in the 1800s. It essentially showed the rotation of the Earth. As the pendulum swings, it appears to be moving around the circle, often people set up pins for the pendulum to knock over to show the passage of time. So the concept is that the top of the pendulum is this fixed point in space and the earth is rotating below it.

In order to make it work we had to put it in Peacock Alley (a bar and lounge at the hotel), which in our project is on the 19th floor, quite high up in the building. But the pendulum has to start a certain distance above that to create a big enough circle for people to really appreciate and see it, so that happened to be through the ceiling, all the way up through the restaurant that's above it, fixed to the ceiling. So when you go to level 21, you see a cage with this cable coming down that goes all the way down through Peacock Alley and it's swinging back and forth.

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MG: Is there a particular time period or movement where you find inspiration?

AW: It's probably one of my favorite parts of design, particularly for hotels. You're researching the country, the state, the city, the neighborhood, the buildings, the architects—all of these elements that might play into a sense of place through historical reference, through architectural reference for that region. We look at the art scene in that area. I definitely have my favorite art blogs that I reference. Artists are just such great thinkers, so I always like to think how do we apply that to what we do?

We pushed the boundary a bit [at Waldorf Astoria Miami]. We're between Brickell and the Design District, so we tried to play up that urban sophistication. We played up the art of Art Basel rather than the Miami of Miami Beach.

MG: What is your dream home?

AW: I can certainly think of others, but I love the house that I'm in now. It's super comfortable. My house is a palette cleanser. Though it's very much a work in progress right now, as we figure out what we want to do in each room. I'm just loving the simplicity of that really plain envelope. Lots of windows, lots of light. Nice details. We live in a 1916 bungalow. It has these very pretty wood-trim details, I like that mix of historic and plain envelope.

MG: What is your favorite place in your own home and why?

AW: My dining room, which is actually quite open to my living room and open to a grand stair hall. The dining room has original built-ins and the box beam ceiling. It's just the heart of our house. It's a lovely place to gather with family.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.